DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 556 CS 509 687

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TITLE Development of a Communications Skills Resource Center at St. Louis Community College Meramec.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (83rd, Chicago, IL, November 19-23, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Higher Education; Learning Strategies; Program Development; Questionnaires; *Resource Centers; *Speech Communication; *Student Needs; Student Participation; Teacher Role; Teacher Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Faculty Attitudes; *Learning Environments; *Saint Louis Community College at Meramec MO

ABSTRACT

A preliminary study examined a project proposal to develop a Communication Skills Resource Center at St. Louis Community College at Meramec. The center would serve to help any students enrolled at Meramec to improve their oral communication skills. Currently there is no academic support service specially designed for students experiencing communication problems in the classroom. The study sought to answer four questions: (1) "What are the appropriate and valid components for such a center?"; (2) "What does the literature yield regarding such a development?"; (3) "What specific subject information should be offered at the center?"; and (4) "How would students and faculty utilize the resource center?" In addition to the observational data obtained, a preliminary proposal for the development of a Communication Skill Resource Center was distributed to all full-time communications faculty to survey their attitudes about initiating such a project in the communications department. Results indicated widespread support for the proposal. Additional survey data will need to be gathered before implementing the Resource Center, and support from other departments and the administration will be very important for continuation of the development plan. Research is needed to address the feasibility of the program and the planning of the resource center. (A sample survey is appended.) (CR)

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ED 415 556

DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS RESOURCE CENTER AT ST. LOUIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE MERAMEC

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CS509687

November 20-23, 1997

INTRODUCTION

The following is a description of a development project to be completed at St. Louis Community College-Meramec over a period of one year.

There is no time to initiate a thorough marketing plan and assessment study to determine if such a Center is needed. There is much evidence gained through observation and exploratory research which supports the need of a Communication Resource Center. With the emergence of ADA regulations, Tech Prep programs, and the continuing presence of accrediting agencies, the Communications Department at SLCC-Meramec is challenged to provide appropriate assessment methods for our basic transfer courses. Through discussions with academic advisors, counselors, communication faculty, and other discipline faculty members, it has been determined that many community college students fear enrolling in communication courses or participating verbally in courses of other disciplines. Many community college courses require students to engage in experiential learning actitivities, group work, class discussion, and collaborative learning projects.

The community college currently offers support to students through the use of the Writing Center and Math Lab, the Study Skills Seminars, and Meramec's Freshman Orientation Program. In 1994 Associate Dean Wil Loy authorized the hiring of a full time professional staff member as Coordinator of Student Support Services. This individual, Ms. Kim Crowne, is responsible for coordinating the student services and developing a comprehensive orientation program. The administration is in support of programs aimed at enhancing students' skills and assuring student success. The

administrative climate and timing is right for the development of the Communication Skills Resource Center.

There is significant amounts of evaluative material which indicate the successes of these student support services on the Meramec campus. This data is readily available from the centers themselves or through the deans' offices. These prior successes would not be the only evidence accrued before the development of the Communication Skills Resource Center. A thorough literature review noting successes of other similar communication-oriented programs would be completed. It is assumed that other community colleges around the country have developed, implemented, and evaluated a program such as the one outlined in this paper.

In addition to the observational data obtained, a preliminary proposal for the development of a Communication Skill Resource Center was distributed to all full-time communications faculty to survey their attitudes about initiating such a project in the communications department. The survey revealed widespread support for the proposal. The department agreed unanimously that the Communication Skills Resource Center, if adopted, be designed to serve any and all students enrolled in classes at SLCC-Meramec. Likewise, all those surveyed felt that if the proposal was adopted, it would have to be treated as a high priority within the department. It should be noted that additional survey data will need to be gathered to further develop the Resource Center.

Nature of the Problem

Many college students at St. Louis Community College-Meramec experience high levels of communication anxiety and thus fear enrolling in communication courses or participating verbally in courses of other disciplines. Currently there is no academic support service specially designed for students experiencing communication problems in the classroom. Other than suffering in silence, soliciting peer support, visiting the counseling center, speaking to the professor or obtaining tutoring, the student does not have one particular place to go for support and training in communication skilled areas.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this project is to develop a Communication Skills Resource Center at St. Louis Community College at Meramec. The Communication Skills Resource Center would serve and help any student enrolled at St. Louis Community College-Meramec improve their oral communication skills.

Research Questions

For the development of the Communication Skills Resource Center to proceed, the following four research questions need to be addressed:

1. What are the appropriate and valid components for a Communication Skills Resource Center?
2. What does the literature yield regarding the development of such communication resource centers?
3. What specific subject information should be offered at the center?
4. How would students and faculty utilize the resource center?

How Solution Affects Educational Policy and Practice

The development of the Communication Skills Resource Center would affect the educational policy at SLCC-Meramec in two possible ways. First, the development of a Communication Skills Resource Center would be one positive method to publicize the department and entice students to enroll in second-level communication courses. While all general transfer students are required to enroll in our basic course, Oral Communication, the Communications Department needs to improve the enrollment in some of the second level courses. Through means such as visiting the resource center, advertising, word of mouth, and academic advisor suggestions, the department may begin to see some improvement in the enrollment in secondary courses such as Oral Communication II, Small Group Communication, and Interpersonal Communication The Communications Department focus has always been and continues to be the improvement of the basic transfer course; yet the faculty members all want to enhance the number of communication majors and serve as many students as possible.

Second, the development of the Communication Skills Resource Center may aid in the ongoing process of developing a district-wide assessment method for all students required to enroll in communication courses. Full time faculty members in the Communications Department are working to advance a communication assessment test to (a) improve articulation policies with transfer universities and colleges; (b) assure behavioral, cognitive, and analytic improvement, and; (c) affirm achievement by the students in specific communication competencies to employers in the area. If and when the center would begin to provide services to students, center personnel could

begin to develop systems to track students' progress in designated communication competencies.

Educational practice would be affected in three ways. First and foremost, the Communication Skills Resource Center would improve teacher/student communication. Many studies cited in education research indicate that higher participation in the classroom creates an environment more conducive to learning. While this statement is very broad-based, the resource center would be available for students experiencing communication difficulty, such as lack of questioning, reticence, lack of organization and communication apprehension, and help them overcome their difficulty to more towards more productive communication behaviors.

The second impact to educational practice includes giving faculty members another outlet to refer students experiencing academic problems in the classroom. For example, biology professors currently can refer a student to the writing center to improve his/her essay writing skills. The instructor does not have to worry about trying to tutor this student in composition skills. A similar situation can occur with the development of the communication resource center. Faculty will be given more opportunities to help their students without compromising their own content areas or ignoring the obvious needs of their students.

The final affect to educational practice is the additional link of the center with the counseling and academic advising departments. With the excessive student load each counselor and advisor must handle, there is no way under the current system that these professionals can help every student coming in with communication problems.

The current strategy to aid a student with communication difficulty is for the advisor to suggest to the student to enroll in a communication course. These students may not need or do well in a communication course. Their needs may be more adequately handled by referral to the Communication Skills Resource Center.

It must be mentioned that these effects to educational policy and practice are assumptions that can only be verified after the evaluation of the Communication Skills Resource Center. There appears to be some belief that these implications to policy and practice are feasible due to the nature of the plan.

PROCEDURES

Development Plan

The development of the Communication Skill Resource Center would occur in broad stages beginning with research, planning and development and implementation of the project. The final step would include the evaluation of the project. The methodology used to complete this project will be action research because a new approach to solve current problems in an applied setting is necessary.. The approach for the development of this Resource Center would take a few comprehensive steps.

First, a questionnaire surveying the interest of the communication department would need to be conducted. Whenever a project of this magnitude is in its planning stage at SLCC-Meramec, some preliminary work needs to be accomplished before it moves from an idea into an actual plan.

This initial questionnaire step has already been completed (see Appendix A). Data generated from a faculty survey indicated that the communications department

has begun to seek out some answers for the aforementioned research questions. Full time communications faculty members remarked that the Resource Center would require the planning of scheduled communication seminars on topics such as communication apprehension, public speaking anxiety, listening, small group discussion, etc., to be presented on the campus and available to all students free of change. The survey also showed support for the development of a physical space on campus where students would be able to drop in for advice or counseling about class assignments that have some communication aspect to them. A majority of survey respondents relayed interest in having accessibility of videotaping and playbacks for students who would use the Resource Center. It should be noted that additional survey data will need to be gathered to further develop the Resource Center.

The second step in developing the Communication Skills Resource Center is the need to research the feasibility of the program and the planning of the Resource Center. Students will be surveyed regarding their interest in such a Resource Center. The Coordinator of Student Support Services and directors of current student support programs will be interviewed to access how these currently offered programs developed. Additionally, counselors, and academic advisors will be approached for their input in the project.

Finally, the Resource Center will be presented to the administration for approval and the project will be implemented. As typical of all new academic and student support projects on campus, the Communication Skills Resource Center will be implemented as a pilot project for one semester. Evaluation by faculty, administration,

and students will take place to provide suggestions for improvement.

In summary, the tasks which will take place include surveying faculty and students; gathering research data from student support centers established on the campus; securing administrative support; planning a budget proposal; developing seminar material; and producing evaluation tools to appraise the success of the program.

Criteria Establishment

Establishing the criteria will help answer the question, what are the appropriate and valid components for a Communication Skills Resource Center? Data generated from the faculty and student surveys and through interviews with student support center directors may indicate a great need for the development of such a center. Issues which will need to be addressed may include: personnel hiring; format of seminars; length of programs; scheduling of programs; possible site location; hours of operation; breath and depth of services provided; equipment necessary; cost of operation; and budget. Once these issues are addressed, the project could then progress to determine which of the list of components are valid and necessary for the development of such a Resource Center.

The literature may or may not yield practical information regarding the development of the Resource Center. It is assumed that there will be much literature about the viability of student support services, but services of the communication nature may not exist. It is possible to extrapolate from the general student support services literature to determine some usable information for the development of this

project. In-house documents may prove to be the most helpful. Before each of the current student support services became a part of the Meramec campus, research such as this was conducted. Therefore, the documentation of these existing programs may provide the framework for the development of this Communication Skills Resource Center.

Criteria Validation

The validation of the criteria will be completed through the use of a committee made up of content experts (i.e. communication faculty) and administrators. The question, what specific subject information should be offered at the Resource Center? can be answered from the data generated from the work of a committee or focus group. A set of weighted guidelines or checksheets would be developed to help the committee evaluate the criteria. Through the use of student and faculty surveys, analysis of current student support services, and an examination of the current content areas in communication courses offered through the department, it should be possible to determine the types of subjects to approach at the Resource Center. Data generated from the surveys should signify what topic areas are of high interest for students.

In order for there not to be an overlap in the student services provided, a thorough review of the current situation should yield what additional subjects need to be addressed. Faculty members currently teaching the basic communication course and the upper level courses may be able to determine which subject areas need more emphasis or which subject areas receive the most student interest. The aesthetic nature of the center can be evaluated through input from administrators who will

analyze the feasibility and user-friendly aspects of the center. Through these four means, information should be received to aid in the development of the content areas of the Communication Skills Resource Center.

Product Development

This Communication Skills Resource Center would be developed according to these specific steps.

Development Plan

1. Survey communication faculty to access need for center (completed)
2. Develop and survey sample of students to determine need for center
3. Establish a formative committee to direct development of project
4. Achieve necessary administrative approval to continue with plan
5. Complete thorough literature review
6. Evaluate current student services on campus
7. Develop content areas to be addressed at the center
8. Construct a pilot program
9. Establish a summative committee to evaluate the program
10. Implement the program
11. Assess the results of the pilot project and make recommendations

Most projects of this magnitude are completed through the use of committees with one person responsible for the implementation of the program. A formative committee would be developed consisting of content experts, assessment specialists and administrators. This committee would guide the development of the center. A set

of criteria would be developed to focus the committees' efforts. It would be expected that the formative evaluation committee would continue to re-evaluate its recommendations and suggest revisions as necessary.

Product Validation

The fourth research question, how would students and faculty utilize the Resource Center? can be answered by describing the validation of the product. A summative committee would need to be put in place to make additional recommendations as to the projects' continued success on campus. The committee would consist of faculty and administration un-related to the development of the project and outside the communications department. The actual use of the Resource Center would have to be determined through accurate and thorough tracking of the pilot project. The actual use of the pilot project would have to be determined as the project proceeded. The current student support services maintains records of student use, and these records could become the baseline or benchmark to determine the success of the Communication Skills Resource Center. These documents may prove helpful in determining the type of use of this Resource Center. Current student support services utilized the campus media to publicize the services. Through publicity in the campus faculty newsletter and student newspaper, students and faculty could become familiar with the proposed project. E-mail, memos, and a letter from the President to the faculty are other methods which may enhance the use of the Resource Center.

The content of the materials generated from the Resource Center will need to be evaluated to determine their validity. Faculty members from the communication

department would be the likely group to determine if the content if relative to the purpose of the center.

Assumptions

This development study maintains some assumptions. First, there is a belief that a problem about communication apprehension exists in the first place. Second, it is assumed that a resource center is the answer to the problem. Possibly one-on-one counseling, tutoring, enrolling in a class could have be viable alternatives to the center. It is also assumed that faculty and administration from other disciplines will support the project and refer students to the center. A development plan of this nature will include some assumptions, but none of them are so strong as to halt the progress of the resource center. The project should be given the opportunity to test its worth to SLCC.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the development of this center is unique to the population at SLCC. With modifications, the plan should be replicable to other campuses, but it is the intent of the study that the center be tailor made to fit SLCC. This plan is also limited to the amount of approval gained from administration. While economic considerations will be kept at a minimum, time as a resource will be extensive. Support from other departments and administration will be very important and will impact the results of this development study.

Expected Outcomes

The researcher believes that the Communication Skills Resource Center would provide the necessary academic support to students in need of improving their

communication skills in the classroom. However, it may take a while before the results of the possible success of the center will be available. Because of factors such as student apathy, lack of awareness of resource center, newness of project and lack of faculty support, the center may flounder before these conditions are absent or controlled. If the successes of current academic support centers are of any value, the Communication Skills Resource Center may provide the additional link towards improved student success.

APPENDIX

ATTENTION ALL FACULTY

SURVEY FOR COMMUNICATION SKILL RESOURCE CENTER

The Communications Department is proposing the development of a resource center for students who want or need additional communication skill training. The Communication Skill Resource Center (CSRC) would be open to all students whether or not they were enrolled in a communications course. The proposed Center would provide the following services:

- ◊ Workshops on oral communication related topics (initial stage)
- ◊ Tutoring
- ◊ Writing Center type focus for oral communication skills such as listening, group dynamics, interviewing, voice and articulation and speech development and delivery
- ◊ Study skills for communication
- ◊ Videotaping services made available to all students visiting the lab
- ◊ Video and written communication-related material available

The **benefits** to faculty would be:

- ♦ ability to refer students who need help in communication skills
- ♦ spend more time on content related issues in class and less on communication training
- ♦ additional academic support services to all students, particularly the under-prepared and ESL students
- ♦ a learning environment were students can *practice* communication skills

The **benefits** to students would be:

- ♦ academic support service tailored to address oral communication skills
- ♦ tutoring resources available
- ♦ opportunity to *practice* skill assignments outside of class
- ♦ speech practice and videotaping

For an academic support center to work, we need faculty support. The Center would preferably develop in stages, beginning with the offering of workshops to students. Phase two would include the development of a facility to accommodate drop-in students and provide communication skill training along with video-taping and critique.

Instructions: Please take a few minutes to complete this anonymous survey. The results will help us determine how to develop the center and what services to provide to students.

1) What communication skills do you require your students to possess? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Class participation
- ☐ Oral presentational skills
- ☐ Listening
- ☐ Other _____
- ☐ Group work
- ☐ Interviewing skills
- ☐ Discussion skills

2) If you had time in the regular semester to include the instruction of communication skills in your classroom, what skills would you want to teach? (Rank 1- 4 with 1 being the most important)

- ☐ Class discussion
- ☐ Group dynamics
- ☐ Presentational skills
- ☐ Interviewing skills
- ☐ Listening
- ☐ Other _____

3) The following is a list of possible workshop topics to be offered to Meramec students. Check the topics you would like to see regularly offered throughout the semester.

- ☐ Reducing communication anxiety
- ☐ Learning how to work in groups
- ☐ How to write a speech
- ☐ Participating more in class
- ☐ Effective speech delivery techniques
- ☐ Improving listening in the classroom
- ☐ Effective nonverbals in the classroom
- ☐ Other _____

4) Can you envision yourself referring students to attend a communication skill workshop? ☐ YES ☐ NO Why? _____

What about referring students to visit the Communication Skills Resource Center?

☐ YES ☐ NO Why? _____

5) If you were in charge of developing the resource center, what elements would you want to include? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Workshops
- ☐ Tutoring
- ☐ Videotaping
- ☐ Study Skills for communication
- ☐ Writing Center type focus
- ☐ Drop in accessibility
- ☐ Practice area for skills assignments
- ☐ Other _____

6) Do you have an idea for a better name for the Center? _____

_____

7) Please use this space to include any comments you have about the proposed development of the Communication Skills Resource Center?

_____

_____

_____

A student survey will also be conducted to assess students' needs. If you would like to volunteer your class to be surveyed (survey will take only about 5 minutes of classtime), please contact Angela Grupas at X7833. The survey will take place in late April.

☺ **Please return the completed survey to Angela Grupas, CS 116 by May 1. Thank you for participating in this survey.**